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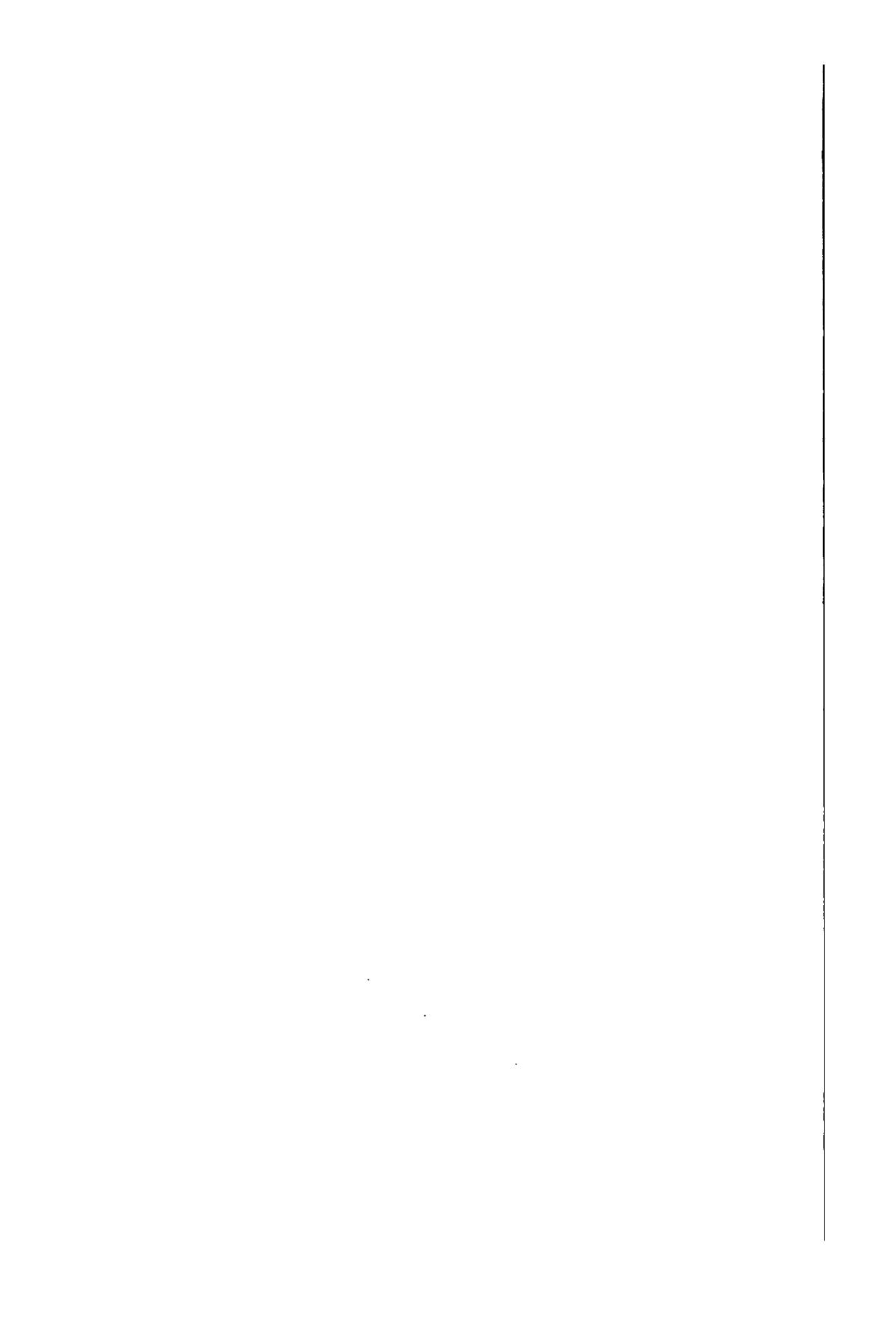
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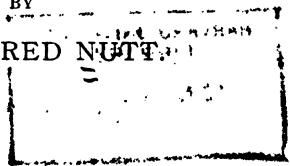




*With a foreword by*

The Critical Study of Irish Literature,  
Indispensable for the History of the  
Irish Race

BY  
MR. ALFRED NUTT.



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*Read at the National Literary Society, Dublin, November 10th, 1902.*

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# The Critical Study of Irish Literature Indispensable for the History of the Irish Race

BY  
MR. ALFRED NUTT.

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Read November 10th, 1902.

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A HISTORY of the Irish race, at once accurate and detailed, possessing that vivid and lifelike aspect which nearly always results from full and accurate detail, cannot but be desired by all who care for that race, whether they belong to it or no. Where are the elements of that history to be sought, and what is the value of each element? If I mistake not, few would answer these questions by placing the rich and varied romantic and poetic literature of the Gael on the same level as his chronicles, genealogies, legal and institutional remains, architectural and archæological monuments; nor would they regard it as contributing aught of primary importance to the wished-for picture of the evolution of the Gaelic race and its culture. The paradox I wish to submit to you is that saga and saint's legend, ballad and romance, vision and satire, elegy and lyric eulogium of nature (the chief categories of Irish literature) are, on the contrary, elements of first-rate importance for the realization of such a story of the Gaelic race as shall be of general and world-wide, and not merely racial and provincial, significance.

And if I succeed in convincing you that this seeming paradox is in reality the sober statement of a neglected truth, I would further ask your assent to the proposition that these elements

of your racial history only assume their true value, only yield up their full secret, when they are studied with all the resources that modern critical scholarship has created and elaborated during the past century.

What is the essential import of Irish history for humanity at large? It is that, like the Scandinavian German, like (but in a far richer and fuller measure) the Brythonic Celt of Wales, the Gael has preserved the older barbaric world of our Aryan and pre-Aryan forefathers almost uncontaminated by Christian-classic civilisation. Do not misunderstand me; I would not for one moment place on the same level the elements which modern European culture has derived from what may be called Aryan barbarism with those it has derived from Graeco-Roman civilisation, whether in its Pagan form or profoundly modified by Christianity. What I do assert is that Humanity would be immensely the poorer if Rome had been as successful in the north-west and north as she was in the south and centre of Europe; if she had imposed her tongue and culture upon Ireland, and Northern Britain, and Scandinavia as she imposed it upon Spain, Gaul, and Southern Germany. But, and this is my point, Humanity would be the poorer in the domain of what is imagined rather than in that of what is realised, in vision and artistry rather than in political and social organisation. Not that we need wholly condemn this latter aspect of barbaric, as compared with Roman culture. We have learned that at every stage of his upward progress, even the earliest, man has devised and elaborated forms of social organisation which do not deserve to perish wholly; further, that progress is not infrequently unjust towards the stage out of which it has immediately emerged, and that, in a yet later and more developed stage, conceptions and practices of the older world may with advantage be resuscitated and refashioned for the new and more complex needs of Humanity. But, give as full weight to these considerations as we may, we must admit that the political and social organisation of Aryan barbarism,

whether Celtic or Germanic, was inferior to that elaborated by the genius of Rome—that it deserved to pass away, that it had to pass away if Humanity was to progress, if the modern world was to be constituted. It is the pathos of Irish history that the Gael clung to his barbaric organisation long after the rest of Europe had accepted and assimilated (with varying degrees of modification) that of Rome. True, he has in this way preserved certain elements of social organisation of which the society of the future may make good use; but, as a whole, he has been waging a losing fight, one which, judged from the stand-point of world-history, it was necessary he should lose. Thus the political and social history of the Gael, and the incidents through which his political and social ideals were made manifest, profoundly interesting as they are to the student as vestiges of an otherwise unknown past, interesting as they are to the Gael himself for what may be called family reasons, have not, and cannot have, for the world at large the same interest as the political and social history of Greece and Rome, or of the Mediæval States formed by the fusion of Græco-Roman and barbaric cultures. The one is in a backwater, the others in the main stream of human progress. In themselves the market-place squabbles of early Athens or Rome, the clan bickerings of Athens and Megara, of Rome and Alba are materially as insignificant as the frontier raids of Connaught and Ulster, or the feuds between Gwynedd and Dyfed; but the one set of events has helped to fashion the world of custom and conception in which all the great civilised communities of to-day are living, the others are simple incidents, picturesque it may be, but destitute of permanent significance.

Thus the chronicle, the record, the document which alone as a rule is designated historical, is, as far as the Gael is concerned, of secondary importance. It deals with an aspect of his activity, precious in so far as it yields us a picture of what our Aryan forefather was, before as yet Greece and Rome were; but negligible in so far as that activity was displayed through the medium of a social organisation destined to perish.

It is otherwise with the document which, instead of recording what the Gael did, and how he organised his social life, reveals to us how he imagined the contact of man with man, or of man with Nature, which sets forth his outlook on life and death, which depicts his dream of an unreal, or his denunciation of a real world. For while political and social forms may, without disadvantage, perish almost utterly, their place being taken by a more advanced form, the products of imagination and fancy, no matter at what stage of culture they originate, cannot vanish without leaving an irreparable void. The details of archaic social organisation have in ninety-nine cases out of a hundred what may be termed a museum interest pure and simple. Valuable, infinitely valuable, as they may be to the student seeking to reconstruct the past, they are valueless, as a rule, for the practical man shaping the practical life of the present. But the detail of archaic emotion or fancy, as preserved to us by archaic artistry, is no dead and dried museum specimen ; it lives, it throbs, and in creative hands it may assume new and more deeply significant forms of beauty.

I have argued hitherto *a priori* for the intrinsic inferiority of the political to the artistic element in the history of Gaelic culture. But I would ask you for one moment to consider the historic element, banishing from your minds such prepossessions as may legitimately exist, because it is ancestors of your own whose actions we are considering, banishing also that student, that museum interest in Irish history, which none of you, I think, can feel more keenly than I do. Consider the historic record purely on its own merits : Whether O'Neill succeed in levying, or O'Donnell in refusing, tribute ; whether O'Conor or O'Brien make good his claim to provincial or head kingship ; whether this or that branch of the clan, in assertion of its tanistry rights, is able to murder or mutilate the representatives of the rival branch ; whether king Harry abbot and annex the abbatial treasures, or abbot defy king and, by successful intrigue, doom him to death or flight—all this, such of you as have read through the Four Masters, may perhaps be

not indisposed to agree with me in finding desperately tedious after a while. But this warfare of kite and crow, to use the Miltonic phrase, what is it, you may say, but the staple of all early, all mediæval history? I can only repeat that in the case of Spain or France, of Germany or Germanic Britain, the bloody and dreary scufflings have a weight, an import, they have not got in the case of Ireland. They are, for the most part, incidents in the long conflict and fusion of the two worlds, Græco-Roman and Barbaric, out of which our modern civilisation has emerged, and as such their echo still rings, howsoever dimly, in our ears, their stamp is still impressed, almost obliterated though it be, on the structure of our material life. It is not, I think you will agree if you turn afresh to the mediæval records of Ireland, the facts of lesser scale, of a more restricted scene of action, a more meagre *dramatis personæ*, that render them inferior to those of the remainder of mediæval Europe; it is because the one series of events is sterile, the others are pregnant.

Certain it is that the record section of Irish literature, the account of the actual deed, or the actual man, is, as literature, by far the least interesting, and compares unfavourably, I will not say with such masterpieces of historical narrative as the Icelandic historical Sagas, or the French crusading chronicles, but even with the great bulk of mediæval chronicles. The Welsh chronicle of the twelfth and thirteenth centuries is, for instance, notably superior to anything of the kind of Irish.

You may admit this without being ready to follow me in my preference of the intellectual, the artistic, aspects of Gaelic culture evolution over the political, the social. I confess it boldly, the *Ollamh*, who commemorates the exploits of king and champion, is to me the more interesting of the two. The rise and fall of a particular fashion of translating reality through the medium of literature is, in my eyes, a phenomenon of greater significance than the rise and fall of this, or that noble family. The emergence, the culmination, the subsidence of a mythic or heroic cycle of legend is, for me, more illuminat-

ing, more revealing than any shifting of power from north to west, or from east to south. I will put the view in the most aggressive form possible, in the hope that a little trailing of the coat may be pardoned in these rooms not one hundred miles distant from Donnybrook. Some of you may remember how, it is now over twelve years ago,\* I hazarded the conjecture that the emergence of the Finn or Ossianic heroic cycle in the eleventh-twelfth centuries, and the consequent deposition of the Cuchulainn, or Ulster, cycle from its place of pride as the chief, if not almost the sole, great heroic cycle of the Gael, was connected with, and dependent upon, the seizure of the head-kingship by Brian and his kin, and the consequent shifting of political pre-eminence from the north and east to the south-west. I am afraid no one, save its father, has ever taken that hypothesis seriously enough to expend the labour necessary to prove, or to disprove it. Allow me for one moment to consider it proved. I will then say further, that, in my eyes, the chief, the most permanent and pregnant result of the life-activity of the victor of Clontarf was that it facilitated the growth and spread throughout all Gaeldom of the hero-tales which told of Finn, and Oisin, and Oscar. And if there be an indignant O'Brien here present I would say with Themistocles : " Strike, but wait until the end of the paper."

But this view of the significance of literature as an index of culture, and as the most faithful exponent of the changes through which every culture necessarily passes, is closely bound up with the recognition of the individual capacities and energies of which literature is the outcome. Behind every book, every legend, every ballad, every eulogy of the heroic deed, or every attempt to picture the beauty or terror of nature there is a man, and a group of men—the one more highly gifted than his fellows, more fitted to make words express what he and they feel, and admire, and detest, but sharing with them a common

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\* In my "Development of the Fenian or Ossianic Saga," *Waifs and Strays of Celtic Tradition*, Vol. II., 1889.

fund of traditional lore, a common conception of life and death, of love and hate. What we have to realise is, that the whole of this literature, fashioned in all its varying forms by individuals, won, and had to win, acceptance at the hands of other individuals, and once this is realised must we not, I ask, recognise in the literary record of Ireland a far truer guide in essaying to reconstruct the mental and moral past of Gaeldom, than is furnished by the monotonous chronicle of harried borders and blinded tanists, or the dry notation of clan successes and failures ?

Recognition of the individual element in the literature of the past ! Aye, but in the case of Gaelic there is an indispensable preliminary condition—critical study of that literature.

Open almost any work dealing with Irish literature and you will find perpetual references to the Book of Leinster, or the Book of the Dun Cow, to the Book of Ballymote, or Lecan. You will often see it stated that the particular MS. cited says this or that ; you will not infrequently find a tacit assumption that a statement made on the authority of the MS. must be referable to the date at which the MS. was compiled. Practices such as these are, unfortunately, as common with the most illustrious scholars as with the most unintelligent compilers. Yet they cannot be too strongly condemned, obscuring, as they do, the fact that Irish literature consists of works separated from each other in date by hundreds of years, originating among different sections of Gaeldom, fashioned under diverse conditions, reflecting varying literary and social ideals. The mediæval MS. is a library not a book. Its contents are no more to be lumped together indiscriminately than are the contents of the British Museum or the Bodleian. The true history of Israel could not be written until the various stages of a literature, extending over centuries, but arbitrarily bound up within the covers of one volume, had been discriminated and arranged in chromological order, and before we can essay the true history of the Irish race we must classify

and date the literary monuments which it has bequeathed to us.

To see in how far this ideal has been realised will enable us to gauge the nature and extent of the task that still awaits accomplishment. Critical study of Irish, as indeed of mediæval literature generally, is unknown before the nineteenth century. The foundations were laid in Ireland by the two great native scholars of the mid-century—by O'Curry in his survey of the chief MS. material; by O'Donovan in the enormous mass of historical, archæological, and topographical comment which he supplied to the many texts, some of first-rate importance, which he edited. Their labours, and those of their followers, the late W. M. Hennessy and Dr. Standish Hayes O'Grady, have had considerable and valuable results. But the spirit in which they worked, the methods they applied, are antiquarian rather than philological or, save in Dr. O'Grady's case, historical; hence what has chiefly profited by their work is the record section of Irish literature, the post-mediæval chronicle, the topographical poem, the local genealogical or historical tract. Perhaps the supreme achievement of this, the native school of criticism, is Dr. Standish Hayes O'Grady's catalogue of the Irish MSS. in the British Museum. Here the author's searching and intimate familiarity with the characteristics and circumstances of the texts described and analysed by him is productive of the most valuable historical results. Incidentally, I may say, that a catalogue of the Royal Irish Academy MSS., compiled on the same plan, and of equally generous scope, with that of Dr. O'Grady, would be an inestimable boon to students. Your Society, and all kindred bodies, should urge its inception with all the power at your command. Nor could Irish Members of Parliament find a more truly patriotic task than to claim for such an object the use of the considerable public fund placed at the disposal of the Academy.

The native school of criticism left almost untouched the most interesting and pregnant section of Irish literature—that of archaic saga or legend, and can hardly be said to have

attempted the solution of the many problems involved. Thirty years ago an inquisitive student would have sought in vain for an answer to questions such as these : "What is the nature of the pre-Christian history of Ireland found in the mediæval chronicles, and its relation alike to the romances of the mythological and to the sagas of the heroic cycle?" "What is the relation to each other of the various romances which make up the two great heroic cycles?" "What is the order of their development?" "What is the place of either cycle in the evolution of Irish literature?" "What is their approximate date?" "What are the historical and social conditions to which they testify, and under which they assumed their extant shape?" "In what way, again, are we to conceive the formal development of all this literature?" "What was its relation to, and influence upon, the life of the mass of the people?" "In what way did it originate, and by what means was it fostered and perpetuated?"

If we are in some measure able to answer questions such as these it is chiefly thanks to the labours of two foreign scholars, Professor Heinrich Zimmer\*, of Greifswald, and M. d'Arbois de Jubainville, of Paris. The writings of the latter, more lucid in presentment, broader in survey, less estranging and forbidding in method than those of the German scholar, have been of inestimable service in familiarising Irish-English students with the spirit and principles of modern criticism. I should like to make it an indictable offence to place O'Curry's *Manners*

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\* Being, as I was, the first to bring Professor Zimmer's researches to the knowledge of British students, and having striven to popularise them to the best of my power, whilst never hesitating to protest when I thought he was wrong, I need not say how heartily I associate myself with the remarks made by Professor Gwynn in his lecture to this Society (May 29th, 1901). I do not, however, think it would be advisable to translate in full any of Professor Zimmer's literary-historical articles, save his study on the composite nature of the heroic saga versions contained in the *Labor na h-Uidhri*. This, with the necessary modifications due to the last quarter century of study, would be an admirable object lesson to the Irish student desirous of undertaking this line of research. I trust that Professor Gwynn will see his way to accomplishing this task. I may be permitted to note that a full summary of Professor Zimmer's article on the Finn Saga will be found in my introduction to Vol. IV. of *Waifs and Strays of Celtic Tradition*.

*and Customs* in the hands of any student who has not first worked through half a dozen of the volumes of the *Cours de Literature Celtique*; he would then be able to profitably use the vast collection of facts brought together by O'Curry, which otherwise, owing to the radical defect of method, to the complete absence of critical spirit characterising the work, is more likely to harm than to help him, to confirm him in an absolutely false view of Irish antiquity than to aid him in realising its true nature and import.\* It is, however, to the German scholar that we owe the most pregnant and illuminating work in the field of Irish literary history; work often marred by prodigious defects, but wearing upon it the stamp of genius, the impress of a passionate, enthusiastic, determined will.

What has already been accomplished is, however, trifling in comparison with what remains to be done. Irish literary history is not, as is the Polar region, a *terra incognita*; but it may be likened to the interior of the African continent some forty years ago. We can surmise roughly the course of the great streams; we can plot in loosely the position of the chief mountain ranges and lacustrine basins. Here and there a daring exploring raid has revealed the details as well as the rough outlines of a district. But we have, as far as the earlier and more interesting portion of Irish literature is concerned, got no fixed points of latitude or longitude; we are destitute of even such rough surveys as may be accomplished by the sole aid of the compass and dead reckoning.

Thus, to revert to the list of queries drawn up by my hypothetical student, whilst we know that that portion of the pre-Christian history of Ireland, commonly termed the "Invasions or Immigrations" period is only rationalised mythology, we are still in the dark concerning the date and nature of the

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\* It is, I trust, unnecessary for me to disclaim any intent to belittle the great modern scholar to whom Irish studies owe so much. But his memory is best served by frank recognition of his limitations, and by separating that which is wholly from that which is less admirable in his work.

rationalising process. Nor is it at all clear how it was affected by the two great external influences to which early historic Ireland was subjected—the introduction of Christianity in the fourth and fifth centuries ; the Norse invasions of the ninth and tenth centuries. And, if in its broad outlines, the mythological character of the personages of the pre-historic cycle is apparent, their essential nature, their dominant attributes, the relation in which they stood to the men who fashioned the romances and annals by which they are known to us, all this is still dubious and obscure. Who can deny, I will not say the fascination (that all will admit) but the importance of determining as precisely as we can the creed of Erin before she accepted Christianity ? In so far as this can be accomplished at all, it can only be accomplished by the most searching cross-examination of all the texts belonging to the mythological cycle. Again, whilst we know that the Ulster or Cuchulainn cycle is earlier in origin and formation than the Finn or Ossianic, and that the one is in the main the product of northern, the other of southern Ireland ; whilst we can be sure that both cycles are the result of a long evolution of originally mythic themes and incidents, influenced and moulded by definite historical and social conditions, and fitted into definite historical frameworks, yet the extent and importance of either element—myth and history—in these cycles have still to be determined. Again, we can roughly group the sagas of the Cuchulainn cycle around the *Tain bo Cualgne*, which must have assumed very much its present shape not later than the seventh and eighth centuries. We can see how these tales of the heroes of the Red Branch attract to themselves and assimilate many independent groups of heroic legend. We can dimly discern the historic conditions which raised an Ulster Kinglet, Conchobor (who, recollect, is scarcely even mentioned by the official annalists) to a position equivalent to that of Arthur in British, or Charlemagne in French romance ; but in each case the details of the process involved are hidden from us So, too, it is evident that the Ossianic cycle, as such, only springs into

prominence after the period of the Norse invasions, and that in its extant form, it has been profoundly influenced by events of that period. But the nature and extent of that influence are obscure in the extreme, whilst the true character of the themes and personages of the cycle and the relation of the completed tales to the men who told and heard them, are even more perplexing than in the case of the Ulster cycle. There exist, likewise, numerous small local heroic cycles, the relation of which alike to the professed historic annals, and to the two great heroic cycles can only be conjectured at present; yet the determination of that relation would throw light upon the real relations subsisting between the various Irish provinces and tribes. Again, not the least interesting section of Irish literature comprises a number of what may be called religious heroic sagas, the evidence of which may, or may not be, essential to the true history of the way in which Christianity was accepted by and influenced the early Irish. Finally, although we are fairly well informed concerning the status and methods of instruction of the literary class in ancient Ireland—a class certainly older than the introduction of Christianity—although we are aware that from the eighth century onwards, at all events, the extant literature was committed to writing and has been transmitted chiefly by scribes belonging to the Christian clerical class, we are very much in the dark as to the relation between the two classes—Ollamhs and Scribes—and as to the influence which the latter may have exercised on the texts they copied; whilst the problems of how far the culture depicted in the texts is that of the storyteller's own period, how far it is pre-historic, how far it may be regarded as a genuine, if heightened and somewhat idealised, transcript of actual conditions, or, on the other hand, a picture in which nearly every element is due to longstanding conventions, answering to nothing real—these problems have been scarcely attacked.

Knowledge of the Irish language is not an indispensable requisite for participation in the task of reconstructing the

development of Irish literature, and thereby tracing the development of the essential genius of the Irish race. Were it otherwise I, whose only claim is that I have read what has been translated with some diligence, and have been able to draw from my reading conclusions which fellow-students have found not unhelpful, should not be addressing you to-night. Quite enough has been translated into English, French, or German to enable the student who reads with diligent and critical perception, and, above all, with the desire to get at the truth, not only to understand the problems involved, but also to contribute substantially towards their solution. Yet, as I need not say to you, it is mastery of the language which alone can fully reveal the secrets of the literature. And here I may note that at every stage of that literature the student who is willing to work is in the position of knowing that his work will not be in vain ; that he is labouring no exhausted soil, but almost virgin ground ; that he is not only increasing his own knowledge but knowledge generally. An almost uninterrupted chain of texts reaches from the oral literature—folk-tale or ballad—of the living peasant to the most archaic sagas of the oldest MSS. As we trace these texts backwards we can trace the modification of the language ; inflections disappear, syntactical forms become simpler or more complex, the vocabulary loses in certain respects, gains in others, and ultimately becomes almost entirely transformed. As the language changes so too does the subject matter of the literature ; cycles of romance rise, and dwindle, and fall ; new methods of conceiving and representing the old themes come into fashion ; foreign influences make themselves felt. So that when the alteration of the language necessitates the re-wording of a text it not unfrequently happens that advantage is taken to re-shape it, to adapt it to the new fashions in social feeling and in literary expression. All this complex and continuous process of transformation, of re-creation as well as new creation, can be traced—and in so tracing it we must recollect that we are bringing to light the life-work of the countless Irishmen and Irishwomen

by whom it was effected—but only at the cost of long, arduous, and often arid labour. When the history of the Irish language has been made so clear that we can with certainty assign this or that grammatical form to a particular century, or a particular dialect ; when we can “ place ” a text by noting its vocabulary, its style, its acceptance of this or that literary convention, then, and then only, shall we be in a position to estimate at its true worth the evidence which that text yields towards the social and moral history of the race.

The first requisite is exact knowledge of the texts as they actually are. If the student can work at the MSS. so much the better ; the very aspect of the written folio, with its many varying scribal hands, with the glossing of later commentators, with the erasures and corrections of later scholars, all this impresses the student with a sense of individual existence, individual effort, challenges him by its assertion of personal activity. Such an impression, such a challenge is seldom made by the printed page. But if the text be printed let it reproduce the original with its utmost fidelity. Orthographical and grammatical peculiarities, strange modes of wording or phrasing, presence of obsolete or dialectal forms, all these are like the fossils, thanks to which the geologist is able to date and place particular strata. Eliminate them in obedience to a desire for uniformity or correctness, and the literary critic is as helpless as would be the geologist if a section were submitted to him from which all the fossils had been carefully removed. The critic wants to go behind his texts, but he cannot do so unless he have before him the actual text, and no editor's counterfeit.

A few concrete instances will exemplify my meaning, and show the kind of results that may be expected to follow from work on the lines indicated. The earliest essay in Irish literary history of the distinguished German scholar to whom I have already alluded, Professor Zimmer, is his Analysis of the Saga Texts in the Book of the Dun Cow. He shows that these texts are of a composite nature ; that they are made up

from earlier and often discordant versions, and that one of the versions thus used is represented by the texts found in the Book of Leinster. He further makes it very probable that the harmonised version (as it may be called) of the Book of the Dun Cow is due to Flann Mainistrech, who died in 1154, so that the Book of Leinster versions, though extant in a twelfth century MS., must be at least as old as the early eleventh century. This in itself is an important conclusion. But it is not the point I wish to make. Turn to Flann's *obit* in the Four Masters, and you read—

“Flann Mainistreach, lector of Mainistir-Buithe, the paragon of the Gaeidhel in wisdom, literature, history, poetry, and science, died on the fourteenth of the Calends of December,” as is said—

“Flann of the Chief Church of melodious Buithe,  
Slow the bright eye of his fine head ;  
Contemplative sage is he who sits with us,  
Last sage of the three lands is fair Flann.”

Now, in analysing the “harmonising” process of the hypothetical editor of the Book of the Dun Cow version, Professor Zimmer has, perforce, to form a conception of his methods of work, of the ideals by which he was animated. There emerges from this analysis the picture of a real man, learned with all the learning of his day, but somewhat narrow-minded and pedantic, loving and cherishing the ancient stories of his race, yet incapable of refraining from an occasional “superior person” attitude, puzzled by the manifold discrepancies of the versions he had before him, sincerely anxious to reconcile them and thereby produce a text satisfying his conscience as an historian and schoolmaster, yet, luckily for us, too conscientious or too unskillful to re-cast in a new and consistent form. In fine, we get a real man in the place of the stained glass effigy of the annalistic obituary.\*

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\* The value of the result does not depend upon whether Professor Zimmer's identification of the *Lebor na h-Uidhri* editor is correct; it is disputed by other scholars, notably by Professor Thurneysen.

Believe me there is hardly a section of Irish literature which, if worked at with the same thoroughness, and the same critical spirit, may not be expected to yield similar results. The *Ollamhs*, *Shanachies*, and antiquary scholars of the past, will start into life, as study of their work reveals their individuality.

I must apologise for taking another instance from my own studies. I can only plead that if, almost alone in these islands, I have followed up this line of research it has been from no failure on my part to urge upon other and better qualified students its importance and fascination. Many years ago I pointed out the marked difference in tone and sentiment between the mediæval Ossianic literature represented by the Colloquy of the Elders and the post mediæval Ossianic ballad poetry.\* In the first we find an exquisite reconciliation of pre-Christian and Christian elements ; hero and saint are on terms of the most charming and cordial mutual affection and respect. In the latter all this is reversed ; instead of mutual acceptance there is deep-seated antagonism ; in the place of a charming but bloodless ideal, recalling involuntarily the cloistered life as seen through the tender eyes of early Umbrian or Flemish painters, we have a full-blooded, virile naturalism, a delight in the joy of battle, and the free, wild outdoor life of the hunter, a fierce scorn of the opposing ecclesiastical ideal. Which mood is best representative of your ancestors ; to whom do we owe the literary expression of either ; thanks to what combination of circumstances has the latter so entirely supplanted the former in Gaelic consciousness that alike in Ireland and Gaelic Scotland the typical figure of the cycle is the defiant Pagan, Oisin, of the ballads, and not Caoilte, the courtly convert of the Colloquy.

All these questions, if fully answered, would, I trust you will agree with me, illuminate as with a torch, a vast stretch of the soul-history of your race. That these questions can be

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\* In my already quoted *Development of the Fenian or Ossianic Saga*.

answered I am convinced; but only after long and arduous drudgery.

My third instance shows how points, in themselves apparently trivial, may yet be vital for the solution of definitely historical problems. If you look at the Scotch Gaelic folk-tales of Campbell's collection you cannot fail to be struck by the presence in the more archaic tales of what are technically known as "runs," descriptive passages of a set conventional character, recurring regularly in given circumstances, evidently ancient, largely unintelligible to the present-day narrators. When I began my study of Gaelic folk-literature, nigh upon a quarter of a century ago, there was nothing in the then extant Irish folk-tale collections, Croker, Carleton, and Kennedy, of a similar nature. As time went on the example of Campbell and his Scotch disciples re-acted upon Ireland; Larminie, Curtin, and Douglas Hyde issued their collections. Herein I found passages similar to, though not identical with, those of the Scotch-Gaelic tales, and I also found in mediæval and early post-mediæval texts, especially in those of the Ossianic cycle, the apparent beginnings of this story-teller's device. Finally, as was shown by Dr. Hyde, the written folk-tales found in Irish manuscripts of the seventeenth and eighteenth centuries contain numberless passages of this character, but very greatly amplified.

Dr. Hyde held that the runs of the Scotch Gaelic narrators are the worn down representatives of the kindred examples in the Irish manuscripts of the last three centuries. To me they seemed rather survivors of a stage out of which the latter had emerged. Judge then of my interest when in M. Dottin's recent French translation of Irish folk-tales, published during the last ten years in the *Gaelic Journal* from oral recitation, I found several Irish peasant narrators, both in Munster and Donegal, using the identical formulas noted by the Campbells, MacInnes, and MacDougall, in Argyllshire and Rossire, and not corrupted versions of the formulas found in the written Irish tales of the eighteenth and earlier centuries.

I was pleased, not because my contention was immensely strengthened, but because a clue was furnished for determining some of the most vexed questions respecting the recent history of the Gaelic language and folk literature. Misunderstood local patriotism (on both sides of the Channel) has done much to obscure true views of the development of Scotch-Gaelic speech and its relation to Irish Gaelic; similar obscurity besets the history of the forms which folk-literature has assumed in either section of Gaeldom during the last four centuries. There is also considerable difference of opinion as to the closeness and extent of the relations between Irish and Scotch Gaeldom during the last two centuries.

The value of the preservation of identical archaic formulas in the extreme north and the extreme south of Gaeldom lies in this, that it provides the critic with a definite criterium for judging questions such as these. Linguistic analysis should be able to determine the date and assign the dialectal *habitat* of the "runs," and from this fixed basis we can argue concerning the state and development of the literature, and the relations of the men by whom that literature has been fashioned and cherished. Thus the half unintelligible, almost nonsensical, formula of an illiterate peasant may yield to the historical critic that convincing fact which he would seek in vain from the official record or the fashionable literature of the time.

In conclusion let me forestall a possible objection. You aim, it may be said, at rearing a race of dry-as-dust pedants, to whom our beautiful old legends shall be only so much raw material for linguistic and historical analysis. You will kill all living and joyous interest in these cherished remains of our past, and who knows what beloved ideals may not be shattered by the critics whom you are calling forth from the vasty deep of the future? I well remember how, at a meeting of the London Society, I was once adjured to leave the dear old legends as they were. I have generally found that when people talk like this they are really referring to the dear old

legends as they are *not*—to modernised, emasculated, prettyfied versions, destitute of value to those who seek to recover from the past an exact picture of what the men and women of that past really felt and thought, destitute also of any seminal force and suggestiveness for the artist who turns to the past for themes and motives of new forms of beauty. It is a common belief that exact knowledge in some way tends to destroy sympathy. This is, indeed, to be a Manichean. I would fain hope there is no such heretic here present to-night, but should there be such a one let me plead with him that exact and faithful knowledge of your early literature will only destroy false and dead ideals, and that it will substitute for them a true, quick, and invigorating ideal, whose power will be as beneficial to the artist as to the student. Indeed, let me insist, it is the Irish artist even more than the Irish student to whom truth in this connection is vital. It cannot be maintained that up to now Irish legend, Irish romance, have yielded the same artistic results as have the legend and romance of Celtic or Teutonic Scotland, of Scandinavia, or Germany, or even Finland. I needs must hold that this is due to the false and enfeebling methods of presentation which prevailed among those who first made Irish antiquity known to the modern world. A tradition was set up of elegant prettiness, of academic bloodlessness, of ignoring whatever was crude, stern, archaic. The full-blooded, passionate barbarians of early saga were decked out in nineteenth century fancy dress costume, and overlaid with a varnish of unreal pseudo-mediævalism. Believe me, if the creative genius of your race is to find sustenance in your past, it must know that past for what it is. True, the artist strives to transcend reality, whereas the man of science seeks to know and interpret it, but yet there is no antagonism between them, for it is reality which the artist must transcend and not a counterfeit, otherwise his work, though it may appeal to a passing mood, though it may be fashionable for a time, is devoid of life, and of the seed of future life. I would fain hear, and I trust that you also would

fain hear with me in Irish literature of the future, the fire and wail of the harp and pipe rather than the drawingroom tinkle of Moore's piano.

But whilst I hold that faithful and veracious study of your literature in its entirety is pre-eminently important for the artistic future of your race, I do not want you to lose sight of its importance for Irishmen at large. In your country more than in others the link that binds present to past is tough and strong. False views, false conceptions of the past thus have a pernicious effect in Ireland, lacking in lands where the break has been more complete, where the present is organised without relation to the past out of which it has sprung. Such false views and conceptions can only be destroyed by patient study, dominated by an implacable love of truth and guided by a vigorous and disciplined method. The very effort to wring all its secrets out of a text is in itself admirable training for whoso would know past and present for what they are, and it is only when we know things as they are that we can profitably essay to make them what they should be.

Alike, then, as the indispensable preliminary to a real and living record of the evolution of the genius of your race throughout the ages; as of vital import to the artists of the future destined to transform and recreate the matter provided by the artists of the past; as a means of mental and moral discipline, truly patriotic in its essence, because it must be undergone from love of race and land, and with no hope of material reward, I commend to you the critical study of the rich and fascinating literature fashioned by your forefathers.









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